

THE BIBLE VERSUS ECUMENICAL EVANGELISM

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The following is excerpted from *The Tragedy of Compromise: The Origin and Impact of the New Evangelicalism* by Dr. Ernest D. Pickering (copyright 1994, Bob Jones University Press, Greenville, SC 29614)

There are several principles of Scripture which serve to sit in judgment on the operational philosophy of ecumenical evangelism.

1. WE ARE NOT TO FELLOWSHIP WITH LIBERALS IN ORDER TO WIN THEM TO CHRIST.

By "fellowshipping" with liberals is meant a cooperation with them in a religious context for the purposes of achieving spiritual results. "Put your warm arm of love around the liberal and perhaps he will change." This is the approach of many. It is not, however, the approach of God. God is first and foremost concerned about the purity of the church. His holiness and the holiness of His people must be preserved at all costs. God is more concerned about holiness than He is about results. God is not interested in successful evangelism which jeopardizes the holy character of the church. "Be ye holy; for I am holy" (1 Pet. 1:16). Holiness involves separation from all that is evil. Religious liberalism is evil; therefore, holiness involves separation from it. After describing the awful moral and spiritual degeneration of the last days, especially noting the popularity of hypocritical religion, Paul instructs the believer to "turn away" from such (2 Tim. 3:5). The Graham philosophy denies that we should "turn away" (refuse them fellowship) but offers a "better" plan--join with them in religious endeavors.

The Graham philosophy on this point was set many years ago when he wrote a definitive article entitled "Fellowship and Separation." He said, "There can be no escaping the conclusion that the main stress of the New Testament is upon fellowship rather than upon separation. The call is not so much to come out as to come together" (Billy Graham, "Fellowship and Separation," *Decision*, August 1961, p. 14).

Let us analyze this succinct statement of Graham's approach to this critical matter. It is true that the New Testament has a great deal to say about fellowship. But it is fellowship among born-again believers, not fellowship among believers and unbelievers. Many of the religious leaders with whom Graham fellowships are rank unbelievers. They reject many of the cardinal doctrines of the Bible. Despite their claims to be Christians, they are not Christians in the biblical sense of that term. But Graham persists in perpetuating the myth that they are Christians who simply have different views on some matters. It is also true that the New Testament teaches both fellowship and separation. The total number of verses on fellowship

may be greater in number (I have not counted them) because the epistles of the New Testament were written to be used in the assemblies of God's people where that emphasis is needed. There is no lack of clear teaching, however, on the subject of separation from that which is evil. God, as always, has the proper balance in His Word.

2. WE ARE NOT TO HONOR FALSE PROPHETS AS TRUE CHRISTIAN LEADERS.

Illustrations have already been given of Graham's accolades for apostate church leaders. Graham was an honored guest at the installation of James Albert Pike as the Bishop Coadjutor of California for the Protestant Episcopal Church of the U.S.A. Pike was an unbeliever of the first magnitude, an open opponent of precious biblical truths. When Billy first began to push his ecumenical agenda in the 1957 New York crusade, he wrote a letter in which he denied the truth of the criticisms that were being leveled at the crusade, and said, "The sponsoring committee are godly men who are seeking to reach New York's vast population with the testimony of the risen Christ" (Letter by Billy Graham, published in Herald of His Coming, November 23, 1956 p. 8). What kind of men were these "godly men" who served? One of them was James Sutherland Bonnell, a leading liberal. Attorney James Bennett, who courageously opposed Graham's New York crusade and lost many friends because of his stand, wrote:

"To add more to the confusion, a friend of mine, who telephoned the New York headquarters of the Billy Graham Crusade, was told that they did not classify Dr. John Sutherland Bonnell as a modernist. My friend was surprised because he knew personally that Dr. Bonnell had refused in 1951 to sign a fundamental statement of faith submitted to him by the Billy Graham organization in existence at that time, and on March 23, 1954, he wrote an article published in Look magazine, implying very plainly that he did not believe several of the fundamental Gospel doctrines, including the Bodily Resurrection of Jesus" (James Bennett, "Supplementary Statement of James Bennett," 1954).

How can men promote the "testimony of a risen Christ" when they do not even believe in a "risen Christ"?

How did Paul handle false prophets who denied the faith? He warned against those who "resist the truth," and called them "men of corrupt minds, reprobate concerning the faith" (2 Tim. 3:8). Never would Paul have considered placing such men in positions of leadership in an evangelistic campaign. They themselves needed to be evangelized and should not be in charge of evangelizing others. They are lost souls in desperate need of a Savior. Nor was the Old Testament prophet Jeremiah flattering to the false prophets of the day: "Woe be unto the pastors that destroy and scatter the sheep of my pasture! saith the Lord. ... I will visit upon you the evil of your doings" (Jer. 23:1-2). Billy Graham does not make pronouncements like that. For this reason he is popular among the false prophets of the day.

3. WE ARE NOT TO DISOBEY THE SCRIPTURES IN ORDER TO WIN SOULS FOR CHRIST.

Much modern evangelism seems based upon the premise that God needs all the help He can get in getting people saved; so if we must 'fudge' a bit regarding scriptural principles, we are certainly justified in doing so. The end (the salvation of souls) justifies the means (cooperating with unbelievers). Where in Scripture is this principle taught?

I remember years ago when a distinguished pastor, William Ashbrook, and I were called to the West Coast to address gatherings of pastors on the issue of Billy Graham's ecumenical crusades. My friend arose to give his message. His first words were: "The primary business of a Christian is not to win souls." There were gasps and grunts. He waited a few moments before uttering his second sentence. "The primary business of a Christian is to do the will of God." This is true. We are not saying, of course, that Christians ought not to win souls. They must do it, however, within the context of scriptural principles. When Peter and his friends had toiled all the night and failed to catch any fish, the Master Fisherman took charge. Peter, no slouch as a fisherman himself, recognized that a Greater was in the boat, and said, "Master... at thy word I will let down the net" (Luke 5:5). In other words, "In accordance with your will, I will do my fishing." Many fish were caught, and Christ informed them that in the future they would "catch men" and not fish. To catch men requires as much obedience to the Word of Christ as did the task of catching fish. We must do our spiritual fishing in obedience to the revealed principles of Christ. Here is where ecumenical evangelism fails.

Saul learned a hard lesson: You cannot substitute a good thing for the best thing-total obedience to God. The first king of Israel was specifically commanded by God to smite the Amalekites, the heathen enemies of God and His people, and to destroy them and all that they had (1 Sam. 15:2-3). Ignoring that command and taking matters into his own hands, Saul spared a portion of the flocks and herds of the Amalekites. When Samuel the prophet reappeared, he enquired whether Saul had completely obeyed the Lord. He discovered that he had not. Saul, however, had a ready defense of his disobedience. He had disobeyed God's instructions about the animals of Amalek so that he could obey God's instructions about the required sacrifices. The animals he had spared were to be used as sacrifices to God. At that point Samuel uttered a monumental statement: 'Hath the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of witchcraft, and stubbornness is as iniquity and idolatry' (1 Sam 15:22-23).

Billy Graham and his followers have justified their disobedience to God's prohibitions of cooperation with the apostates with the plea that they are winning souls to Christ and that this overshadows all other considerations. This line of reasoning, however, is obviously contrary to the principle given by Samuel. Sacrifices were good, proper, and scriptural when practiced in accordance with the will of God. When practiced apart from the will of God, they were not acceptable. So it is with evangelism. Evangelism is commanded in Scripture, but so is obedience to God. We cannot evangelize while disobeying God.

4. WE ARE NOT TO DISOBEY THE SCRIPTURES ON THE PLEA THAT WE ARE DISPLAYING GOD'S LOVE.

Many Christians have a distorted view of the nature of God's love. New Evangelicals have stated, "The badge of Christian discipleship is not orthodoxy, but love." Current New Evangelicals trumpet the fact that fundamentalist separatists are harsh and abrasive while they are loving. Love, according to them, overlooks doctrinal error and embraces almost everyone who claims to be a Christian. Love does not criticize nor condemn. Love merely affirms.

It is very plain from the Scriptures that love and obedience walk together. Consider these words of our Lord.

1. "If ye love me, keep my commandments" (John 14:15). 2. "He that bath my commandments and keepeth them, he it is that loveth me" (John 14:21). 3. "If a man love me, he will keep my words" (John 14:23).

The Lord commands in His Word that His people "have no fellowship with the unfruitful works of darkness, but rather reprove them" (Eph. 5:11). Liberal preachers are sources of the "works of darkness." To fellowship with them is to disobey this command; to do so is, in fact, unloving.

This passage, plus the utterances of Christ just cited from John's Gospel, declare clearly that if one would obey Christ, one must refuse cooperation with apostates. The proponents of ecumenical evangelism, however, do not agree with this premise. In the face of scriptural admonitions to the contrary, they continue to cozy up to the Christ-denying church leaders.

5. WE ARE NOT TO SEEK TO PLEASE AS WIDE A CONSTITUENCY AS POSSIBLE IN ORDER TO GAIN A SYMPATHETIC HEARING FOR THE GOSPEL.

One of the points that Graham defenders have made is the fact that hundreds of people from liberal churches hear the gospel of Christ because their pastors and churches cooperate in the crusades. This is a flagrant case of religious pragmatism. We employ whatever methods work regardless of the scriptural principles involved. Certainly this was not the methodology of the early apostles and their followers. Paul, in combating the Judaizers who were trying to flavor the gospel of Christ to suit the palates of Jewish hearers, declared, "For do I now persuade men, or God? or do I seek to please men? for if I yet pleased men, I should not be the servant of Christ" (Gal 1:10). "Men-pleasers simply do not hurl anathemas against those who proclaim false gospels" (Donald K. Campbell, "Galatians," Bible Knowledge Commentary, 2:591). An apt observation indeed! But, regrettably, Billy Graham does not "hurl anathemas" at those great number of supporters who preach a false gospel. His failure to do so wins him many friends, but does it fulfill the commands of the Lord?

6. WE ARE NOT TO CONDONE FALSE DOCTRINE AS THOUGH IT WERE OF LITTLE CONSEQUENCE.

The Roman Catholic church teaches heresy, but Billy Graham condones and encourages its leaders. They teach many doctrines which are directly opposed to the Word of God; yet their leaders and members are featured or included in Graham crusades and conferences. So also is it with the charismatics who insist that sign-gifts are still operable today. Paul did not mince words about false doctrine when he wrote, "Now the Spirit speaketh expressly, that in the latter times some shall depart from the faith, giving heed to seducing spirits, and doctrines of devils" (1 Tim. 4:1). The great apostle of love, John, was not only concerned about the manifestation of love but also about the repudiation of error. He did not advocate a naive gullibility concerning doctrine. 'Beloved, believe not every spirit, but try the spirits whether they are of God: because many false prophets are gone out into the world' (1 John 4:1). In pursuing that theme he said that we should be able to differentiate between the "spirit of truth, and the spirit of error" (1 John 4:6).

Spiritual discernment is important and must be exercised. There is a vast difference between truth and error and this difference ought not to be ignored or glossed over.

7. WE ARE TO RECOGNIZE THAT SOUND DOCTRINE HAS PRIORITY OVER FELLOWSHIP AND THAT TRUE FELLOWSHIP IS BASED UPON SOUND DOCTRINE.

Doctrine has fallen on evil times. Few wish to battle for what they call "peripheral" doctrines. They wish to emphasize instead our unity in Christ and the blessings they see flowing from that.

God's view of doctrine, however, is much stronger than that of some evangelicals. When the first local church was founded in Jerusalem, its characteristics were noted. There were four of them, but the first one mentioned is steadfastness in the "apostles' doctrine" (Acts 2:42). Fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers followed the mention of doctrine. It is noteworthy that doctrine is the first on the list. It would not be of such paramount importance to many evangelicals today. A little later in apostolic history Paul was concerned that "the things which become sound doctrine," be taught in the church (Titus 2:1). Often Paul refers to "sound doctrine," that is, doctrine which is healthy and not contaminated by error. He was most concerned that this kind of doctrine be perpetuated in the churches.

Ecumenical evangelism is not in line with God's program and principles. It is an attempt to bring together that which should not be together. "Can two walk together, except they be agreed?" (Amos 3:3). "What fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness? and what communion hath light with darkness?" (2 Cor. 6:14). God has separated light from darkness and no one, not even in the cause of evangelism, should attempt to take down those divinely erected barriers.

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